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Defining Success: The Fall Mid-East Meeting

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Like any complex diplomatic event, the upcoming Fall meeting should integrate a number of threads. In addition to an agreed document, it should unveil a credible follow-up process, develop the regional dimension in terms of Arab involvement in the peace process, and produce deliverables that ground any diplomatic outcome in reality. Defining the success of the meeting based on only one of these elements will turn it into an all-or-nothing event, maximizing chances of failure and giving its opponents ample opportunity to unrealistically define expectations. The US role in defining and ensuring success is indispensable. It must design and time its role –whether substantively or in terms of process – cautiously to ensure maximum effectiveness.

The Document

Current discussions surrounding the Fall meeting tend to focus almost exclusively on the expected document as the primary outcome. A substantive document would definitely constitute a significant development and would go a long way towards improving the atmosphere in Palestine and regionally. It is almost certain, however, that a detailed, specific agreement is not achievable by the Fall.

For one thing, there is little time for thorough negotiations. This is especially true given the fact that the parties had not discussed permanent status issues officially for over six years. An effective negotiation rhythm has to be developed almost from scratch. On the outstanding substantive issues, the two parties seem to be diametrically opposed: the Palestinians want clarity on Jerusalem and territory while avoiding conclusive statements on the refugees, while the Israelis wish clarity on the refugees and seek vagueness on the two other issues. The dynamic that will prevail in the short run, given political and time constraints, is one of lowest common denominator, leading to a general, vague document that is not likely by itself to satisfy domestic constituencies and silence critics.

Defining success only in terms of the document is already producing an unhealthy dynamic. One tendency is to attempt to reach a document at all costs, even if the document ends up saying nothing. Such an outcome, especially if expectations are built up, can do more harm than good. Another tendency – seen occasionally on the Palestinian side – is to revert to the

option of not holding the meeting if a satisfactory document cannot be reached. There are palpable fears of a repeat of Camp David, where Palestinians become the obvious and least costly target of blame. Needless to say, neither of these options is constructive, and both would squander the current diplomatic momentum.

The excessive focus on the document has also concentrated the attention of critics. Opponents of the meeting on both sides are already laying out "red lines" and forcing the leaders to prematurely respond on matters of substance. Others are deliberately building up unrealistic expectations to lay the groundwork for a public relations counter-offensive to follow the meeting's eventual "failure" to reach these overblown goals. Voices in Israel are complaining in advance about the alleged inability of the Palestinians to deliver even if a deal is reached. On the Palestinian side, many are already fishing for Israeli and American statements to point out the supposed futility of the whole diplomatic effort.

Process

While the parties – with international encouragement – should continue to work on reaching an agreed document, and while it is too early to categorically preclude the possibility of a breakthrough, serious effort should be devoted to designing the process that will follow the meeting. These are not mutually exclusive projects but rather twin necessary complementary components of effective peace-making. To be sure, launching a process is not without risk. The very term "process" has become discredited in the region, conjuring up a history of process for its own sake, and process as a substitute for substantive progress. Yet there is no way for serious negotiations to be developed outside the context of a mutually-agreeable and functional process and framework.

If a robust, credible process is fleshed out, this would constitute a meaningful political and diplomatic achievement for the meeting. Politically speaking, such an achievement can generate its own traction. If such a process is launched in November, it can turn a modest agreement from a flop – which is how it will be inevitably defined if it is the only outcome of the meeting – into a success.

Diplomatically speaking, even if there is significant progress on substance, a follow-up process will still be indispensable. It would be irresponsible to assume that a process would automatically design and sustain itself once a document is unveiled. This mistake has been repeatedly made in the past. While it would be a stretch to claim that previous negotiations failed because of poor process design, it is still fair to say that many pitfalls could have been avoided had more careful attention been given to process itself.

The main challenge lies in defining a credible process. Novel elements must be included within the process to create incentive for progress and to periodically inject energy as time passes. As a process is being designed, it is possible to build into it focusing events that serve to clarify and propel the negotiations forward. Just as the November meeting has helped focus the sides and build up energy, future meetings can serve a similar function. The dates of these meetings can either be pre-arranged, or – if either party fears that dates may become pressure tools – can be triggered by specific progress benchmarks. Such future meetings could also serve as opportunities to reward progress made in negotiations. For the Palestinian side, rewards can take a myriad of forms such as third party deliverables on the diplomatic or economic levels. For the Israelis, it can take the form of increased levels of participation and

recognition by the Arab world, among other incentives.

The Arab Factor

Arab participation in the Fall meeting is now typically regarded as an all-or-nothing proposition: either the Arabs, especially Saudi Arabia, attend or the meeting will automatically constitute a failure. This approach creates unrealistic expectations, promotes unnecessary tension and acrimony, and squanders potential opportunities. Arab states feel that they are being pressured into attending – and paying the political price for attending – a meeting that could be a mere photo opportunity without long-term benefits. They fear an embarrassment and a waste of political capital. A more constructive approach would link Arab participation to progress in the negotiations, with progressively higher levels of attendance triggered by pre-defined benchmarks to be reached by the parties. This should culminate in full normalization once a peace agreement is signed as provided by the Arab Peace Initiative. This approach can give incentive for Israel to make progress and would support Palestinian negotiation decisions as they are made.

Linkage to Reality

A negotiation process that is not reflected on the ground will quickly lead to public disenchantment. An obvious case in point would be actions that prejudice the outcome of a permanent status agreement. Settlement expansion, settlement outposts, and action to change the nature of Jerusalem can easily render any negotiation process hollow in the Palestinian public eye and would erode trust. Such issues need to be factored in if a process is to be credible.

As importantly in terms of immediate public opinion are issues of quality of life and security. Lack of progress on establishing security and reforming the Palestinian Authority would quickly dissolve any Israeli public or political support for negotiations. The Palestinians must prove that they are as much partners on the ground as they are on the negotiation table. Conversely, continued poverty, lack of access and movement, and absence of personal security for Palestinians would give credence to critics that cast negotiations as a smoke screen to legitimize abusive Israeli practices.

Long-term structural changes to social, economic and political realities on the ground will inevitably have to be developed over an appreciable period of time and would need a separate process of their own for implementation. On the other hand, immediate deliverables, whether between the parties or from third parties, would ground the negotiation process in reality and create both the sense and the substance of momentum. Such deliverables should be strategically sprinkled throughout the negotiation process, with the caveat that they should not turn into divisive objects of protracted negotiations or become seen as ends in themselves.

The Role of the United States

Only the United States is in a position to piece these disparate elements together in a coherent package. It must, however, design its approach carefully to ensure that it uses its

influence and resources to optimally support progress, and to avoid inadvertently creating hindrances.

In terms of the substance of an agreement, the US has so far been encouraging bilateral negotiations rather than getting substantively involved. Any departure from this approach should be carefully weighed and meticulously thought through. Substantive American ideas might be useful – and will probably even be necessary – at some stage. If such an intervention is impulsive or ill-timed, however, it could be counterproductive.

Premature substantive intervention could cause the parties to in effect stop negotiating together, withhold any bilateral progress, and start negotiating with the Americans, hoping to "sell" concessions to them. Such ideas could become a lightning rod for criticism by both parties and may cause them to retrench and dig deeper in their positions. For now, negotiations should continue to be left to the parties and allowed to take their natural course until a major stumbling block or some other decisive moment requiring intervention is reached.

More urgently, the United States has a leading role to play in designing the process and obtaining buy-ins from the various actors. At the conceptual level, the United States is in a privileged position in terms of its extensive diplomatic resources, insight into the mindset of the various local and regional actors, and the wealth of lessons learned from past experience. On the diplomatic level, only the United States can deliver the elements for the complex process that will be needed to move forward. The United States needs to start immediately marshalling all the necessary supportive packages, including economic, diplomatic, and security-related incentives – a matter that will inevitably entail complex diplomatic wrangling. Diplomatic and financial support will need to be first secured then mobilized from Europe and Asia. The Arab role should be agreed with the concerned states, which will in all likelihood require an additional extraneous price, specifically assurances and increased coordination regarding Iran. All of these will take time and should be started immediately, lest we reach November insufficiently prepared. If a process is launched and the world fails to deliver what it takes to make it succeed, the backlash, as bitter history strongly suggests, could be significant.

Conclusion

The upcoming November meeting has created a significant window of opportunity where only a few weeks ago none existed. The challenge now is to ensure that this window is utilized. The meeting should not be approached as a one-dimensional event, but should rather aim to start integrating the complex factors necessary for sustainable peace-making. As the parties continue to try to bridge their fundamental differences towards ending the conflict, the international community under United States leadership should create the supporting process and environment necessary to ensure the success of the meeting and the viability of what follows.

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